

Bilingual Teachers Take Part in Immersion Program in Mexico

Emilio J. Arribas

You don't have to know about Carlos Fuentes' novels or Diego Rivera's murals to enjoy and benefit from an immersion program in Tlaxcala, Mexico. On July 15, representatives of the Mexican Ministry of Education welcomed 11 Michigan bilingual teachers at Mexico City's International Airport. From there, together with other bilingual teachers from Chicago and Los Angeles, we all traveled by motor coach to Tlaxcala, a city located 75 miles southeast of Mexico City.

In Tlaxcala, for what turned out to be one of the most exquisite and challenging summers of our lives, we took part in 15 days of intensive seminars

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dealing with Mexican history, geography, mythology, folklore, politics, and education, including children's literature in Mexican schools. The seminars were conducted by professors from universities in Mexico.

Class participation, infrequent at first, became lively and intense. The seminars were conducted in Spanish, and the participants put their bilingual skills to good use. Initial fears soon gave way to confidence as Spanish fluency reached higher and higher levels. "This program has been a very good experience for me," reported Margie Moyet-Deschaine of Clarkston, Michigan. "It has motivated me to actively improve my Spanish through reading, speaking, and formal training. I have learned important things about the Mexican culture such as the significance of our Lady of Guadalupe. I am very glad to have had this opportunity. I found the Mexican people to be very warm and friendly."

Renee Haraburda and Bertha Vela, Spanish teachers in the Detroit area, also echoed other participants in their comments. They explained that their participation in this program had convinced them that the high school Spanish curriculum gives too much emphasis to the European roots of the Hispanic language and culture and too little to the evolution of the language and culture of the Americas. They felt this program had helped them change their teaching focus to reflect current developments among Hispanics in our country and in the Spanish speaking world.

As happens with Fuentes' novels, this immersion program required hard work which, of course, was no reason not to enjoy it at the same time. When reading Fuentes' novels, after a while, seemingly disparate pieces of the plot start to come together. Such was the case with this program. The delight of the experience alone made it well worthwhile for the 65 bilingual teachers from the United States who were in attendance.

Lilia Alvarado of Flint, Michigan said, "The stay in Mexico renewed my pride in my ethnic and cultural background. It made me feel proud of my rich history and wonderful culture. Even though the country and its economy are in sad state, the Mexican people are hardworking, optimistic, and realistic. I, for one, wish them a better tomorrow."

The Michigan bilingual teachers, some traveling abroad for the first time, were dazzled and moved. Our Mexican hosts spared no effort to make our stay challenging, beneficial, and very enjoyable. They served us Mexican delicacies daily, including a great assortment of chilis, the herb epazote, paella, nopalitos, chinicuiles, pollo en nogada, several flavors of chorizo, and varied salsas, fruits, cheeses, tortillas, and pan dulce.

The state of which Tlaxcala is the capital is well known for its elegant crafts and exquisite weaving. Specialities here are articles crafted from wool. Because

the rate of exchange was 2,853 pesos to the dollar, a number of us experienced what it means to be a millionaire for the first time. Indeed, it takes only \$351 to make a million pesos. With our million in hand and tempting crafts everywhere, some of us went on a buying spree.

Mexico's crafts, after all, are reflections of what is important to its people. When Mexicans' thoughts turn to their country, its culture and art, they are their strongest and loveliest: "Coming to Mexico was important to me," said Rosa Lambaria of Davison, Michigan, "because my knowledge of Mexico, its people and culture was very superficial. I have gained a better understanding and deeper empathy for Mexican people, especially the town's people and the working class." Tlaxcala was an ideal location to share in the Mexicans' pride in their country, its values, and traditions.

The Program was an intensive cross-cultural experience. The seminars were held in a government-owned vacation center called La Trinidad. It had all the amenities of a first class hotel and was alive with sounds of music and of Mexican people enjoying themselves. Our classes were held from 9:00 to 2:00 daily and brought home to us what cross-cultural education and children's literature in Mexican cultural contexts is all about. The goals of our lessons were to learn firsthand about Mexican history, geography, mythology, folklore, politics, and education and to understand better the role that one's heritage plays in personal development and education.

Our group also visited historical and cultural sites and participated in social events in Tlaxcala, Puebla, Mexico City, and other important centers. But the climax came when we toured Cacaxtla, one of the great Tolteca ceremonial centers of Mesoamerica. Here we saw murals and ceremonial structures that predated the Roman Empire by several hundred years. Kirk Harder, a bilingual teacher in the Flint area, spoke for many of us when he said, "La cosa mas interesante para mi fueron las charlas sobre las culturas de Mesoamerica y la visita que hicimos a Cacaxtla. Lastima que no hubo tiempo para visitar otros centros ceremoniales!" [The most interesting thing for me was the presentations on the cultures of Mesoamerica and the visit to Cacaxtla. What a pity that there was no time to visit other ceremonial centers!]

Seven of the Michigan participants are graduate students at the University of Michigan-Flint. Five of these students are currently working with bilingual children in the Flint area. Three are High School Spanish teachers in Royal Oak, Saginaw, and Troy. And two have no classroom experience yet. At the completion of the program, the University awarded three credit hours in comparative education studies to each of the participants.

The Program has had a strong effect on these young teachers and will